

Testimony Regarding:

**S.B. 302 An Act Concerning The Identification of Connecticut's Child Placement Needs;
S.B. 306 An Act Establishing An Independent Department of Children and Families
Ombudsman; S.B. 307 An Act Implementing A Quality Assurance Program for Department
of Children and Families Programs and Facilities; S.B. 310 An Act Strengthening Child
Fatality Review Procedures; S.B. 312 An Act Concerning The Protection of Particularly
Vulnerable Children
Committee on Children**

Edie Joseph

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Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban, and distinguished members of the Committee on Children:

I am testifying today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization working to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

Underlying our work at Voices for Children is the fundamental belief that *all* children, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, ability, or geography should be assured of a meaningful opportunity to achieve their full potential. For some children, such meaningful opportunity cannot exist absent state intervention, supports and services. **For those children, children whose families are not able to offer safe and nurturing homes, the state through its Department of Children and Families bears a unique responsibility.**

On behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, I am here today to testify in support of the concepts of Senate Bills 302, 306, 307, 310, and 312, which together have the common theme of strengthening the Department of Children and Family's (DCF) ability to support its vulnerable children through increased transparency and greater inter-agency collaboration. We applaud the work that DCF has taken in recent years to implement best practices in regards to the vulnerable population of children they serve, and we look forward to working with DCF moving forward.

First, we support S.B. 302, which requires the Department of Children and Families to report annually on all children residing or placed in out-of-state facilities. Over the past several years, DCF has made important strides in reducing the number of children in out-of-home and out-of-state care. The most recent Court Monitor's report details this progress: "The number of children in group care has been reduced by 763 or 53.5 percent. The number of children out of state has been reduced by 347 or 95.9 percent. The percentage of children in care who are in a kinship home has risen from 21 percent to 35.3 percent."¹ As discussed in Connecticut Voices for Children's December 2014 report "Because Relationships Matter: Improving Opportunities and Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care," this shift in practice to in-state, in-home, and in-family care is developmentally appropriate and follows research-based child welfare best practice standards.² This legislation builds on the progress DCF has already made by requiring a report and needs assessment for all children placed out-of-state. While currently DCF's Federal Court Monitor reports this data, it is important that the agency has the infrastructure in place to

continue tracking and monitoring this key data in the future, particularly when DCF is no longer under court supervision.

Second, we support the concepts behind Senate Bills 306 and 307, calling for an independent ombudsman at DCF and for DCF to utilize the national Performance-based Standards (PbS) tool for its juvenile justice facilities. Both of these bills represent recommendations made by the Connecticut Juvenile Training School Advisory Board (which includes a representative from the Judicial Branch, the Chief Public Defender's Office, the Chief State's Attorney's Office, and a family advocate), and speak to ensuring oversight, accountability and transparency in the functioning of the juvenile justice division of the Department. Through its work with Georgetown University's Center for Juvenile Justice Reform (CJJR), DCF has recently identified areas to improve upon in its juvenile justice system. We appreciate the Department's desire to focus on these areas and seek out CJJR's assistance, and we believe that these bills will provide opportunities to work on several of these areas, including risk assessment, quality assurance, and data collection.³ In particular, PbS, launched in 1995 by the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), is a data-driven improvement model grounded in research that holds juvenile justice agencies, facilities, and residential care providers to the highest standards for operations, programs, and services. PbS provides a uniform data collection and reporting tool that shows the impact of the services on youth, staff, and families. **The use of PbS and an independent ombudsman can lead to greater transparency and accountability of the agency that serves our most vulnerable youth.**

Finally, we support Senate Bills 310 and 312, calling for the strengthening of child fatality review procedures and greater inter-agency collaboration to adopt policies and procedures to protect particularly vulnerable children from unexpected death or critical injury. DCF has already taken important measures to focus on the unique needs of 0-3 year-olds through its new initiative identifying high-risk families and increasing interventions, in part in response to a report issued in July 2013 by the Office of the Child Advocate. The OCA report highlighted the particular vulnerability of this age group, and pointed out that the majority of children who died unnatural deaths in 2013 had been involved with DCF. These bills strengthen the internal protocols and procedures that DCF has already begun to implement, and also heighten transparency and inter-agency collaboration. If we are to prevent unnecessary child deaths, it is critical that all such deaths are investigated, that the results of those investigations be made public, and that there be yearly public hearings on the findings. We must also increase the use of evidence-based, in-home clinical services, such as home visitation programs and trauma-informed practices.

In order for all of these bills to be effective, it is imperative that adequate resources be made available to all agencies involved, especially DCF and OCA. We are confident that DCF is continuing on the right path, and that with adequate resources, together we can work towards ensuring that all children in Connecticut can grow up in safe and supportive homes and communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony. Please do not hesitate to reach out to myself or any other staff members at Connecticut Voices for Children with any questions.

Thank you,

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¹ See, "Juan F. v. Malloy Exit Plan Quarterly Report July 1, 2014-September 30, 2014 Civil Action No. 2:89 CV 859 (SRU)," available at http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/positive_outcomes/pdf/3rd_Qtr_2014_final_report.pdf.

² For more information, see Edie Joseph and Kenneth Feder, "Because Relationships Matter: Improving Opportunities and Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care," Connecticut Voices for Children, December 2014, available at: <http://www.ctvoices.org/sites/default/files/cw14relationshipsmatter.pdf>.

³ For more information, see Marion R. Kelly, MSW "Final Report for the State of Connecticut Department of Children and Families," June 2013, available at: http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/juvenile_services/pdf/connecticutparolereport_nov_final.pdf.